



# Deadly exceptionalisms, or, would you rather be crushed by a moral superpower or a military superpower?



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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, I consider the ways in which nationalism in both the U.S. and Sweden relies on notions of exceptionalism, and I discuss what this means materially for their own populations and for the world. The analysis consists of two lines of attack against both these assumptions of exceptionalism – one focusing on psychological processes and the other political economy processes. I examine the historical development of the ideas of U.S. and Swedish exceptionalism, and consider the roles of ignorance, denial, and projection in maintaining these problematic ideas. Through the use of a materialist definition of racism, I show how the nationalist ideology of exceptionalism in these two cases harms the well-being of their own citizens as well as citizens of other states. I argue that a combination of the psychological and political economy approaches are necessary if we are to both understand the power and impact of exceptionalism as a nationalist ideology and to be able to effectively work against their tendency to “crush” marginalized groups.

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## Introduction

In this essay, I consider the ways in which nationalism in both the U.S. and Sweden relies on notions of exceptionalism, and I discuss what this means materially for their own populations and for the world. The analysis consists of two lines of attack against both these assumptions of exceptionalism, where I review the processes at work behind the production of exceptionalism, the Others which are involved in the construction of these national identities, and the material forms of racism that haunt both the U.S. and Sweden and betray their claims to exceptionalism. I argue that we need to combine a psychological analysis with a political economy analysis if we are to understand the power and impact of exceptionalism as a nationalist ideology.

While the majority of the academic literature on national exceptionalism focuses specifically on “American exceptionalism”, in an important sense, assumptions of national exceptionalism are in fact an inherent element of the ideology of nationalism. As Tom Nairn (1981) argues, “nationalism” is composed of two elements: nationalism and *nationalism*, the former referring to the general ideology of the naturalness of nations and the ideal of the nation-state (where each nation has its own state), the latter emphasizing

the uniqueness of each nation, the qualities that make each nation special. There is hardly a nation on Earth that doesn't think of itself as exceptional in some way. Indeed, when Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Front in France, was recently caught plagiarizing a speech by one of her political rivals (Breedon, 2017), it was revealed that the sections that she plagiarized articulated specifically some of the ways in which she understands France as special or exceptional.

But while most nations can make a claim to being “exceptional” in some way, in the political geography and international relations literature, “exceptionalism” is primarily associated with the U.S. This is not inevitable; for example, K.J. Holsti (2011) considers exceptionalism to be a type of foreign policy, one that is both rare and not limited to the experience of the U.S. But “American exceptionalism” is the default “exceptionalism” in the academic literature, and it is with this version of exceptionalism that we begin.

## “American exceptionalism” as a nationalist ideology

While the usage of the term “exceptional” as a characteristic of the U.S., as a set of governing institutions or as a people, was uncommon until the 1930s, the belief that “America” is exceptional in various ways has had “tremendous staying power” (Roberts & Di Cuirci, 2013: ix), emerging even before there was a United States and still thriving in the 21st century. Starting in the 20th century, “American exceptionalism” came to be understood as consisting of

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two elements, exemplary and missionary (Restad, 2015). The U.S. (I prefer to avoid using “America” as much as possible, since there are “Americas” beyond the U.S., and furthermore, my focus is on “America” as an idea or ideology) is thus exceptional as an example for others to follow (I would call this “passive exceptionalism”), or, as exceptional, it has a responsibility to reshape the world in its image (missionary or “aggressive exceptionalism”). Another common dichotomy in the literature relates to whether scholars conceptualize exceptionalism as simply an objective reference to difference (that is, what makes the U.S. different from other countries (e.g. Lipset, 1996; Lockhart, 2003)), or whether exceptionalism is meant to convey a normative claim of superiority (why the U.S. is *better* than other countries (see, e.g., Kattenburg, 1980; much of Samuel Huntington’s work)). There is a symptomatic elision between these two perspectives, as Restad (2015: 17) points out: “the very idea of an objective – as opposed to ideational – definition of exceptionalism is nonsensical. Why use the term “exceptional” if one does not mean normatively superior? American exceptionalism cannot simply mean different, because all nations are different.” The nonsensical nature of the conceptualization of “American exceptionalism” (and “exceptionalism” in general) is a hint that what is at work here is ideology – and in particular, the ideology of nationalism. Natalie Koch (2017: 145) is correct in seeing “the normatively-laden idea of American exceptionalism as a staple of the country’s nationalist ideology”. The literature on exceptionalism is impossible to understand without reference to both ideological nationalism and methodological nationalism – both of which contribute to a state-centric analysis and an inclination to “buy” the nationalist narrative of exceptionalism.

So how can we work around these problems of ideology and methodology? Restad, for example, productively focuses on exceptionalism as a belief system. She considers the belief in American exceptionalism to be a foundational element of the (dominant) national identity in the U.S. This identity consists of three main ideas: first, the U.S. is distinct from the Old World, not only different but *better*, and this superiority is crucial because it underpins the second idea, which is that the U.S. has a special and unique role to play in world history. The third idea is that the U.S. will resist the laws of history by remaining a superpower indefinitely, in contrast to the ultimate downfall of all previous world powers. These three ideas are interconnected, and the last idea suggests that there may be an underlying anxiety surrounding the maintenance of the U.S.’s superpower status, as a future decline of the U.S. would undermine all three elements of the belief in its exceptionalism. We can fruitfully connect Restad’s analysis with Holsti’s (2011) typology of exceptionalism as a type of foreign policy, in particular with regard to Holsti’s claim that exceptionalist states understand the world as hostile to their interests, indeed that such states *need* external enemies, even if they have to be fabricated. These ideas support the argument that a psychological perspective on the idea of “American exceptionalism” (and exceptionalisms in general) is critical to understanding the function of this nationalist ideology. So in the next section I will show how a psychological analysis can be applied.

### *The psychology of exceptionalism*

The importance of the psychological approach is actually hinted at from the beginning of the idea of “American exceptionalism”, which is typically traced back to John Winthrop’s characterization of the Massachusetts Bay colony in the early 1600s as a “city upon a hill”. The reference is to Jesus’s call for his people to be a light in the darkness in the New Testament (Matthew 5:14). The verse actually reads: “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set upon a hill cannot be hid” (Di Cuirci, 2013: vii, my emphasis). As Di Cuirci points out, this is a double-edged message: the city on the hill is, because

of its geographical position, both a beacon *to* the world and vulnerable to hostile agents *from* this world. Thus, at the heart of this particular notion of U.S. exceptionalism lies a fundamental psychological tension: this new nation serves as a beacon of hope, a superior people working on behalf of God, but that beacon is vulnerable to attempts to both hinder its message and topple its physical embodiment. I would argue that this sense of threat to the security of the nation is intimately bound to the sense of exceptionalist superiority that is part of the ideology of U.S. exceptionalism. The idea is that “we” are always under threat *precisely because we are exceptional*. As Holsti (2011: 384) puts it, exceptionalist states “portray themselves as innocent victims. They are never the sources of international insecurity, but only the targets of malign forces ....They are exceptional, in part, because they are morally clean as the objects of others’ hatreds”, and it is this moral cleanliness that is insufferable for the malign forces that would destroy the city upon a hill.

This perceived vulnerability generates fear, but interestingly in the U.S. case, it is not only (or perhaps even primarily) external malign forces that frightened the citizens of the North American colonies; it was internal forces that dramatically affected the collective psyche of the European settlers. Robert Parkinson (2016a), for example, argues that the writers of the Declaration of Independence were motivated more by “racial fear and exclusion” than by concern for “inalienable rights”. In Parkinson’s analysis of the era of independence, the European settlers felt severely threatened by the possibility of uprisings of the enslaved as well as attacks by the Native American nations. These fears were immortalized in the language of the Declaration, which cited the twin threats of “domestic insurrections” and “merciless Indian savages” (Parkinson, 2016b). One can simply not ignore the psychological dynamics that were present during the origination of the idea of “America” and the founding of the “exceptionalist” U.S. state.

So while I clearly argue for the relevance of a psychological understanding of exceptionalism, I would part with Restad when she gives causal power to U.S. national identity (and by extension the belief in exceptionalism) to shape U.S. foreign policy. The psychological approach is particularly important with regard to the public consumption of the narrative of exceptionalism, but I wish to refrain from giving these dynamics too much credit for the determination of foreign policy. Instead, I think we need to complement the psychological approach with a political economy perspective if we want to be able to evaluate the material drivers of U.S. foreign policy. For help here we can turn to an analysis by John Agnew in this journal from 1983.

### *The political economy of exceptionalism*

Giving causal explanatory force to the ideology of American exceptionalism on U.S. foreign policy is, for Agnew (1983: 164), to accept the transcendental idealism of the exceptionalists, “to abandon any pretense at history and instead engage in a propaganda exercise”. In other words, it is to mistake the rhetoric for the reality. Doing history instead of propaganda means taking a political economy perspective. But Agnew certainly does not ignore the discursive aspects of U.S. exceptionalism, as one of the first questions that he takes up is that of the origins of the assumptions of exceptionalism. According to Jack Greene (1993), there was a rather widespread hope in the 17th and 18th centuries that “America” would represent the regeneration of European civilization, a reference to the exemplary or passive form of exceptionalism, where “America” constitutes a model for the world to follow. What made it possible for the idea of “America” to hold this position was its *newness*; as James Robertson (1980: 26), describing one of the major nationalist myths, puts it: “Americans are a new people,

formed out of a migration of people seeking freedom in a new world". So this idea of newness is key, and we might say that the discourse of newness propels the U.S. from passive to aggressive exceptionalism, from exemplary to missionary (while not exactly replacing the exemplary). To quote [Robertson \(1980: 26\)](#) again,

The American sense of uniqueness has come also from the belief that the mission of its people was to create a nation where a nation did not exist. Nationalism included expansion, but it was expansion into the wilderness—into a wilderness which was part of the nation and at the same time had to become part of the nation. So Americans were crusaders, bringing civilization and freedom to the wilderness.

In order to realize its destiny, the U.S. had to expand its territory. At least, that is the ideological interpretation. But Agnew does not stop there, since a political economy approach requires attention to factors that provide the material impetus for state expansion.

For even if political leaders in the U.S. have often explained the state's aggressive exceptionalism as an inevitable outgrowth of its divinely-ordained passive exceptionalism, political-economic interests have always lurked in the shadows, preferably unnamed, though occasionally admitted to openly. So while the Secretary of the Treasury might claim in 1847 that the country's past expansion was guided by a "higher than any earthly power", a power which "still guards and directs our destiny, impels us onward, and has selected our great and happy country as a model and ultimate centre of attraction for all the nations of the world" ([Agnew, 1983: 153](#)), President McKinley could admit in the late 1800s, discussing the need for the U.S. to control the Philippines, that "we could not turn them over to France or Germany—our commercial rivals in the Orient—that would be bad business and discreditable" ([Agnew, 1983: 154](#), my emphasis). Agnew traces the transition in U.S. foreign policy from its early colonialism to imperialism, which represents a shift from territorial expansion (in North America and abroad) to a focus on getting the upper hand in the web of international networks and relations in the global capitalist economy. And here is where we find more explanatory power for the understanding of the pattern of U.S. interventions around the world. Indeed, [Roberts \(2013: xxviii\)](#) even argues that the "early exceptionalism of America meant the unique opportunities of its resources" rather than referring to a characteristic of the people who lived there (whether indigenous or European) – according to this view, a materialist perspective on "American exceptionalism" is actually endogenous to the very concept.

The rapid industrialization of the U.S. after the Civil War brought an increasing reliance on globally-sourced inputs and global markets for U.S. products. "Wracked by economic panics, recessions, depressions, and booms, the U.S. capitalist economy had no choice but to become global" ([Mitchell, 2017: 270](#)). While I do not have room for a thorough review of the political economy of U.S. foreign policy, there are various sources that provide this perspective ([Agnew, 1983; Domosh, 2006; Mitchell, 2017; Smith, 2003](#)).

The reader may now justifiably wonder how I would reconcile the psychological approach for which I argued earlier with the political economy approach described here. I do believe that both perspectives are necessary, but they operate at different levels and interpellate different agents. The psychological approach is particularly necessary to understand how, and why, U.S. exceptionalism is communicated to ourselves and to others, and to appreciate why certain discourses and narratives resonate with (certain segments of) the (heterogeneous) general population. The psychological approach thus helps us to understand the public reception of the ideology of American exceptionalism (and nationalism generally) as well as its ongoing reproduction. The

political economy approach, on the other hand, provides *better* (though not necessarily *exclusive*) explanatory power for the pattern of U.S. foreign policy and international "interventions" (a euphemism for military actions such as invasion). The psychological perspective is not *irrelevant* for the understanding of the decision-making of political and economic leaders, but I would argue that its effect on the actual conduct of foreign policy is less than many believe. In other words, political economy shapes the overall contours of foreign policy while psychology illuminates the processes of its justification. This is clearly an oversimplification but it expresses the general point I am trying to make.

One practical problem with this analysis, though, is that in mainstream scholarship as well as in the public discourse, it is considered rather unseemly to state that U.S. foreign policy is based to a large degree on the advancement of U.S. corporations in the global economy. The historian [David Potter \(1954: 134\)](#) perhaps unwittingly provides some support for this assertion, when he writes that "we have been historically correct in supposing that we had a revolutionary message to offer but we have been mistaken in our concept of what that message was. We supposed that our revelation was "democracy revolutionizing the world", but in reality it was "abundance revolutionizing the world". The reference to abundance connects to the political-economic foundation of U.S. foreign policy, but the language with which Potter expresses this idea is still trapped by the ideology of exceptionalism.

A more candid formulation of the reality behind the rhetoric was offered in 1948 by U.S. diplomat George Kennan, who when discussing the strategic position of the U.S. after World War II, had this to say in a previously classified memo: "We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population." The challenge facing the U.S. leadership then, was "to devise a pattern of relationships that will permit us to maintain this disparity" ([Robinson, 1996: 1](#)). Kennan can say this for internal consumption, but publicly the justification of U.S. foreign policy is typically done with reference to the exalted *ideals* the U.S. is supposed to stand for. While the control of resources is a fundamental drive behind U.S. foreign policy, it is the advancement of freedom, democracy, respect for the rule of law, and universal human rights that always gets top billing when selling U.S. interventions. To a significant extent, then, the ideology of U.S. exceptionalism is built upon a *denial* of the materialist basis of U.S. foreign policy, and thus we come back to psychology. We will return to this and related problems for a clear-eyed discussion of the nationalist ideology in the U.S. later, but having now sketched out the dynamics of a "psycho-political economy" approach to the understanding of the ideology of U.S. exceptionalism, we now turn to the case of "Swedish exceptionalism" to see how well this perspective holds up in another context.

### Swedish exceptionalism and the *folkhem*

Compared to the long history of the idea of "American exceptionalism", the origins of a belief in "Swedish exceptionalism" are more recent. When John Winthrop was writing about "America" being a city on a hill in the 1600s, the Swedish state was at the height of its power, having established a regional empire including parts of what are today Norway, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Germany, and Denmark. Not to be outdone by the other European empires, it also actively sought to establish colonies abroad, and during John Winthrop's life Sweden had, for a few years, a colony called New Sweden on the Delaware River, as well as small colonies in the Caribbean and in West Africa ([Naum and Nordin, 2013; Weiss, 2016](#)). (Added to this history of external expansionism is the (ongoing) internal colonialism of Sápmi – the territory of the indigenous Sami people.) The loss of Finland to Russia in 1809 marked the definitive end of Sweden's expansionist history, and

Sweden experienced widespread poverty for much of the 1800s into the early 1900s, which was the primary reason behind the emigration of millions of Swedes to the U.S. during this period. While we can say that, during the era of colonialism, the Swedish leadership was certainly influenced by the missionary discourse that sought to justify the establishment of empires and the spread of European civilization, there was, in this regard, nothing *exceptional* about Sweden as a European empire.

Rather, “Swedish exceptionalism” is grounded primarily in the idea that the country is a “moral superpower”, and this reputation has its seeds in the establishment of the welfare state (sometimes referred to as the “Swedish model”) from the 1930s onward. Scholars tend to consider the publication of Marcus Childs’ 1936 book *Sweden: The Middle Way* as an originator of the idea of Sweden as an exemplary state. For a world on the cusp of a second devastating world war in a generation, Childs portrays the Swedish welfare state as an effective compromise between communism (or socialism) and capitalism, a “middle way”. Thus from a political economy perspective, the Swedish model – which is included in a “Scandinavian model” for some observers (Musial, 2002) – represents the ultimate compromise between social democracy and global capitalism. The Swedish model protected the interests of Swedish workers through centrally-negotiated, industry-wide collective bargaining agreements, while at the same time providing advantageous conditions for Swedish and global corporations (Lundberg & Tydén, 2007). And in an era where we are allegedly experiencing the “end of history”, it might be hard to appreciate how urgent such questions would have felt for people in the 1930s (see, e.g., Greif, 2015). After dealing with war and depression many people had serious doubts about the viability of any of the existing models, and along comes Sweden with what appeared to some to be a new, rational, and stable solution to the eternal tensions between labor and capital: a strong, centralized (capitalist) state with a comprehensive welfare system. As Winston Churchill put it in a message accepting the 1953 Nobel Prize for literature, the world “looks with admiration ... to Scandinavia where ... countries, without sacrificing their sovereignty, live united in their thought, in their economic practice and in their healthy way of life. From such fountains new and brighter opportunities may come to all mankind” (Musial, 2002: 11). So this marks the beginning of an exemplary Swedish exceptionalism, with a strong external component – it was the views of people *outside* Sweden that originally established the idea of Swedish exceptionalism (Ruth, 1984), whereas in the U.S. it was a combination of external and internal perspectives that gave birth to that country’s exceptionalism. In fact, as Arne Ruth (1984: 65) points out, this international attention sometimes made Swedish politicians uncomfortable: during World War II, the Swedish intellectual Gunnar Myrdal noted that Swedish officials visiting the U.S. “went to a great deal of trouble to refute the image of Sweden as a real-life utopia, pointing out, among other things, that very many Swedes were still extremely poor by American standards”. But if it was initially international observers who articulated the notion of Swedish exceptionalism, this idea was adopted fairly quickly by Swedish elites and the general public alike, such that over time “the collective sense of being exceptional” constituted a mythology that was “the very backbone of the national consciousness” (Ruth, 1984: 92).

In terms of the defining characteristics of Swedish exceptionalism, we have already pointed to the social democratic welfare state and the idea of the Swedish model as the mythology’s key early components. Gradually other characteristics were merged into the mythology. For example, the fact that, since 1809, the country had been officially neutral and successfully avoided (active) participation in war contributed further to the idea of Sweden as a peaceful state that respected international law and human rights, even though the

country has been neutral more in rhetoric than in reality (e.g., Holmström, 2011). Other components of the more contemporary version of Swedish exceptionalism relate to the perceived stability of its political system, an official emphasis on economic and gender equality, and a general anti-racist attitude in society.

Finally, there is a critical underlying factor supporting the relevance of Sweden’s exemplary exceptionalism, and one that connects to the ideology of “American exceptionalism”: the idea of “newness”. As seen in the above quote from Robinson, it was the idea of the newness of America that made it possible for Europeans in both North America and Europe to project their grandest hopes onto this space. There is an interesting parallel here to the Swedish case, because the original foundation of Swedish exceptionalism, the *folkhem*, is notable for its discursive newness. *Folkhem* literally means “people’s home”, although that term fails to capture the nuances associated with the concept. The term *folkhem* most typically refers to the Swedish welfare state, but I consider *folkhem* as consisting of five interconnected projects: 1) an ideological project (promoting equality, solidarity and collectivism); 2) a state-building project (the creation of a strong, centralized welfare state); 3) an economic project (an attempt to provide economic security against the disruption caused by industrialization); 4) a social project (freeing individuals from their historical dependence on the family and other (local) social bonds – this has been referred to as “Swedish state-individualism”; see Berggren & Trägårdh, 2006); and 5) a nationalist project (an attempt to create a modern (and gendered) Swedish nationality, as imagined by experts and technocrats). The link to modernity here is very powerful, Swedish identity is nothing if it is not modern, and *new*. The *folkhem* was in part about creating a new Swedish nation. As Jan Larsson (1994: 167, my translation) writes:

The *folkhem* was not only a question of building the country. It was also a question about shaping the modern human. Sophisticated techniques of domination [*härskartekniker*] were introduced in order to implement the modern “system change”. The new modernity demanded that society’s organization went through an institutional renewal as well as a break with traditions that stood in the way of a modernization of Sweden and the creation of the new human. The power of tradition also constituted an obstacle for the scientific standardization of techniques that had the capacity to “*lägga livet till rätta*” and mold the new community around “the good life” for all.

*Lägga livet till rätta* is a difficult phrase to translate. The closest we can come in English is probably “make life right”, in the sense that it refers to the project whereby “social engineers” and planners would scientifically discover and devise the most efficient and best ways to do things, particularly in the sphere of reproduction. It is important to appreciate the enormity of the *folkhem* and its associated projects, as it was about nothing less than *the creation of a new, modern nation*. While Sweden was not alone in this regard among Western countries (Greif, 2015), the Swedish state was able to capitalize on its history of professional administration to successfully realize the *folkhem*’s projects. However, in contrast to the U.S., the important role of the idea of newness did not compel an expansionary period for the Swedish state, as its modern borders had long since stabilized and its small size did not present an opportunity for expansion.

#### *The psychology and political economy of Swedish exceptionalism*

So newness is a key element of the supposed exceptionalism of both Sweden and the U.S. But what we also see in my conceptualization of the *folkhem* are the connections to the psychological

and political economy perspectives discussed earlier. The *folkhem* is in part a project involving the creation (we might say *engineering*) of a new, modern, Swedish subjectivity. It is in some respects a utopian nation-building project that seeks to shape how Swedes both behave and think (Hirdman, 2010). This nexus of attitude and agency was in the minds of some international observers when they praised the “Swedish model”. Some commentators, on the other hand, associated Sweden’s exceptionalism with the state’s efforts to navigate the global political economy of industrial capitalism. A major priority of the *folkhem* was to soften the disruptive capacity of capitalism while assuring its continued reproduction. I claim that this fateful compromise of the *folkhem* with capitalism is also what incapacitates the contemporary Swedish state as capitalism matures into what we now call “globalization”, but I do not have the space here to develop that argument. Suffice it to say, both the psychological and political economy perspectives are necessary for a nuanced understanding of the *folkhem*, both as practiced in Sweden and as understood by Swedish citizens and international observers.

If we come back to the concepts of exemplary or passive exceptionalism and missionary or aggressive exceptionalism, we can see that the initial understanding of Swedish exceptionalism clearly resided in the notion of Sweden as a model that other countries could emulate if they would so choose. But would it not be a stretch to say that Sweden’s expression of exceptionalism mirrors that of the U.S. also in the case of the missionary or aggressive aspect? Sweden’s foreign policy has by necessity not been characterized by anything close to the aggressiveness of the U.S. in the international arena. There is, however, an interesting strand of Swedish exceptionalism that positions Sweden as a small state that can have an disproportionately large impact on the world due to its agitation for and promotion of human rights in global organizations and its reputation as a “moral superpower”. For example, the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme once wrote: “As a small state we have as our goal a world in which the principles of sovereignty and non intervention are fully respected. This has also made it possible for Sweden, albeit to a modest extent, to build bridges between South and North in a period marked by crisis and the risk of polarization” (Ruth, 1984: 73). The political economy perspective is actually relevant here, because as a small country with a limited domestic market, Sweden’s high-tech economy is very dependent upon global trade. Indeed, the government’s foreign policy statement of 1976, stressed “the importance of Sweden’s commercial and industrial relations with the developing nations, thus giving further cause for the suspicion, sometimes voiced by Sweden’s industrial competitors, that the rhetoric of international solidarity is only the pursuit of commerce by other means” (Ruth, 1984: 74). Hence the cognitive dissonance of the country that embraces a “feminist foreign policy” (Barry, 2017) while at the same time cultivating and maintaining relationships with patriarchal dictatorships such as Saudi Arabia (Sweden’s “most important export market in the Middle East” according to Business Sweden).<sup>1</sup> As *Aftonbladet* political columnist Katrine Marçal (2015) writes (my translation):

There is a hypocrisy inbuilt in Swedish social democracy. In its relationship to the world and its image of itself and Sweden internationally. On the one hand, Sweden wants to be the “world’s conscience.” ... A “moral superpower” .... On the other hand, Swedish social democracy has constructed a welfare state that is built on exports. Swedish products that need to be sold. To the world. A world that does not only consist of rainbows and

gummi bears, but also dictators .... Money that Swedish companies earn goes toward fair wages to Swedish workers as well as taxes to the Swedish state. That’s the way you finance a welfare state ... It’s just that the concept “export” also includes “weapons exports”.

I would argue the term “hypocrisy” does not *quite* capture the full truth of the incongruity that Marçal describes here, because different social agents have different relationships to the material realities of the relations between Sweden and the rest of the world, and to the processes that built the *folkhem*. Indeed, a similar point can be made about U.S. exceptionalism. For some, the problem is ignorance of these material realities. For others, it is denial. In both the U.S. and Swedish examples, the political-economic realities reveal the disconnect between the exceptionalist rhetoric and the “deadly” reality. In the following section, we will thus consider some of these questions of ignorance, denial, and hypocrisy.

### Deadly exceptionalisms

Here we will review in some degree of detail the processes that produce these ideologies of exceptionalism and the blind spots that facilitate their longevity. We will also ask the question: In what ways are U.S. and Swedish exceptionalisms *deadly*?

#### *The deadliness of American exceptionalism*

The term “deadly exceptionalisms” is not intended as a rhetorical flourish. I refer specifically to mortality and more generally to diminished life chances and degradation of material living standards, and I would also include under this umbrella any harm to psychological well-being. In this analysis, I employ a materialist definition of racism. In the next section I will look at the mechanisms by which U.S. exceptionalism increases the fatality and harms the living standards of certain populations inside and outside the borders of the U.S.

#### *Historical ignorance, repression, and denial, and the deaths of external others*

One central contributor to this problem of *deadly* exceptionalism is that the understanding of the country’s history is undermined by the nationalist ideology’s warping of the version of U.S. history that is taught in schools (Loewen, 1995). This produces an ignorance of key aspects of U.S. history that would offer a divergent picture of the country’s history than that of a beacon for freedom and human rights for all (see, e.g., Zinn, 1995). In some cases, the problem is the ignorance of, for example, the original presence and then genocide of the indigenous population, or the brutal reality of slavery. But in those cases where there is indeed adequate knowledge and awareness of genocide and slavery, one can seek refuge in the sanctity and security of the privileged American exceptionalist national identity. As Kemmelmeier and Winter (2008: 862) write, “Darker aspects of American history, such as the enslavement of Black Americans or the genocide of Native Americans, are virtually never viewed as relevant to the essence of what it means to be an American—an identity that is inherently good”. An additional alternative is, of course, (for the majority white population) to live in denial and repress these uncomfortable and inconvenient facts. Consider the fact that “America” is supposed to be exceptional because it represents *from the very beginning* a break from historical oppressions and a new freedom for its people, at the same time that it is built upon the twin horrors of slavery and genocide (not to mention the relegation of women to second-class status, as well as

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.businesssweden.se/Export/marknader/mellanostern/SaudiArabien/>.

the reservation of democratic rights to the property-owning class). I would suggest that the experiences of genocide and slavery amount to a considerable trauma for the collective psyche of the nation. Repression and denial of this trauma lead to a state of ignorant innocence that enables the foreign policy establishment to so successfully flag “American exceptionalism” as it formulates and justifies U.S. actions in the global arena.

This kind of deadliness effects people who are U.S. citizens (through institutional racism, police brutality, job discrimination, and so on), but “American exceptionalism” is also deadly for people outside the U.S. (as in the case of the untold number of civilians who have been killed over the years in U.S. bombing raids). Part of the reason for this is, again, ignorance – ignorance of geography in general and specifically of the actions of the U.S. internationally. The irony about the mainstream reaction to the allegations of Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is that the U.S. has been meddling in foreign elections for decades. The list of “interventions” in the affairs of other countries by the U.S. just since 1945 is very long – Blum (2000) lists dozens of such interventions, by the CIA or the U.S. military, ranging from interference in elections to outright invasion. There is very little awareness of many of these events among U.S. citizens and scarcely any reporting. To some extent the reaction to accusations of Russian meddling is hypocrisy, but at the same time it is difficult to argue that people are being hypocritical when they are not even aware that their own country has done such things. What explains this ignorance? As noted above, it is in part due to an education system that ignores much of these interventions, and paints the ones that are covered in the most positive terms possible (Loewen, 1995). It is also partly a problem of “fake news”. I agree with Donald Trump that something like fake news is a problem (see e.g. Hedges, 2016), but of course I do not define it in the same way, because Trump’s definition does not seem to have anything to do with the veracity of news reporting. The problem is that the mainstream media in the U.S. has for a long time been quite protective of “state secrets” and international “interventions” by declining to report on certain activities or hiding their true nature when they are mentioned. A classic account of this foreign policy subservience of the media can be found in Herman and Chomsky (1988) where the authors introduce a “propaganda model” that is based on a political economy perspective. Ignorance of the interference of the U.S. in the democratic institutions of other countries, not to mention more heinous crimes such as “secret” bombings in places like Cambodia, undermines the ability of U.S. citizens to demand accountability for past actions and more restraint in the state’s future actions. As a result, more civilians die.

This is not to say that there is no opposition to such actions by the U.S. state abroad, but it is certainly difficult to question the notion of “American exceptionalism” or the assumption of the foundational goodness of the U.S. So when Trump (of all people) replied “What, you think *our* country’s so innocent?” to a question about Vladimir Putin being “a killer”, the mainstream media and the political establishment professed to be shocked and insulted (e.g., *The New York Times*, 2017). It is perhaps telling that the obituary of historian Marilyn Young, a “feminist, antiwar historian who challenged conventional interpretations of American foreign policy” (Roberts, 2017), was titled “Historian Who Challenged U.S. Foreign Policy” – as if challenging U.S. foreign policy was noteworthy and unusual enough to be the headline of one’s death notice. So there is a significant challenge to those who would seek to make U.S. exceptionalism less deadly.

#### *Spatial projection and the deaths of internal Others*

A psychological alternative to repression and denial is to project traumas such as slavery onto others. Much of my own work has

focused on what we can call the spatial projection involved in internal orientalism in the U.S., where the idea of racism is projected onto “the South” and thus confined there in the national imagination (Jansson, 2003, 2010). I call this discourse that creates a moral landscape of uneven racism “southering” – racism is understood as being an inherent part of the social fabric in “the South” in a way that does not apply for the rest of the country (Jansson, 2017). Southering makes an important contribution to the reproduction of U.S. exceptionalism, in part through the way it understands the region as a stage for the (internal) *practice* of the state’s exceptionalism (Jansson, 2007) – the cure for the region’s problems is to make “the South” more like “America”.

The importance of southering is not only that it helps us to deny the horrors of the past, but also that it blinds us to the horrors of the present. For example, racial segregation is in many parts of the North worse than it is in the South (Allen & Turner, 2012; Sugrue, 1996; Theoharis and Woodard, 2003). Overall in the U.S., African Americans, Latin@s and Native Americans live shorter lives and are less healthy than whites (Kolata, 2017; Smith, 2017). In order to sidestep the discourse of southering it is useful to have a materialist, rather than a discursive, definition of racism. Ruth Gilmore (2007: 28) defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” This kind of definition foregrounds the material conditions of the lives of individuals and allows for comparisons across group categories, in a way that does not start from assumptions about place or region. So U.S. exceptionalism is “deadly” due to its contribution to group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, thanks in part to the denial and ignorance it facilitates.

#### *Sweden’s deadly exceptionalism*

Let’s now move to the Swedish case – surely Swedish exceptionalism must be free of much of what I am critiquing in U.S. exceptionalism? The answer to that question is clearly “no” when approached from a materialist perspective. The “deadliness” of Sweden’s exceptionalism is obviously much more limited than that of the U.S., given the small size of the country and its two-century long lack of (direct military) involvement in foreign wars. Even so, we can identify similar kinds of problems with the nationalist ideology of exceptionalism as found in the U.S. case.

#### *Historical ignorance, projection, and the deaths of internal and external Others*

We saw above the problems with denial and the production of an ignorant innocence, and there seems to be a general agreement that most Swedes have very poor knowledge of the era of Swedish empire and the country’s involvement in colonialism (e.g. Weiss, 2016). (This is consistent with my own experience teaching political geography at the university level in Sweden.) Whether this will change as a result of some excellent recent scholarship remains to be seen. Past studies of colonialism have been criticized in recent years for whitewashing Sweden’s colonial experience, romanticizing this era in Swedish history and emphasizing the contribution of Swedish “adventurers” (Fur, 2013). It is indeed fitting that Fur (2013: 17) characterizes the relationship between colonialism and Swedish history as “unthinkable connections”; a major obstacle to an increase in the level of knowledge and understanding of Sweden’s colonialism is the very self-image of Swedes as a humanitarian superpower. Even an otherwise clear-eyed observer such as Arne Ruth (1984: 72) can write that Sweden has “no colonial past”. A colonialist history fits very uncomfortably with the modern Swedish identity produced by the *folkhem*. Indeed, according to one study of history textbooks used in Swedish high schools, Sweden is

portrayed as best in the world in terms of freedom, peace, gender equality, welfare and democracy (Danielsson Malmros, 2012). This historical ignorance makes it difficult for white Swedish citizens to appreciate the capacity for their society to participate in problematic activities *in the present*. A case in point is the Swedish government's ongoing repression of the Sami, in part through legal challenges to their internationally-recognized rights as an indigenous people. At the same time, I would hesitate to claim that Swedish colonialism constitutes a trauma for the collective psyche in quite the same way that slavery and genocide do in the U.S., as in Sweden there appears to be less general awareness of this aspect of their history. But I am clearly arguing here in support of a psychological approach to understanding Swedish exceptionalism.

This leads us to the more “deadly” aspects of Swedish exceptionalism, in the sense that I suggested above that it is especially white Swedes who are subject to this ignorant innocence. There is not space here to summarize the many excellent studies of racism in Sweden; some focus more on the discursive aspects of racism (Hirvonen, 2013; Hübinette, 2012; Hübinette & Lundström, 2011; Yngvesson, 2015) while others approach racism from a more materialist perspective (Aldén & Hammarstedt, 2014; Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Dahlstedt & Hertzberg, 2007; Schierup & Ålund, 2011; Schierup, Ålund, & Kings, 2014).<sup>2</sup> It is abundantly clear that Sweden is profoundly immersed in racism, a fact that, while it certainly does not make Sweden unique, still betrays the exceptionalist idea of Sweden as an explicitly anti-racist society. One's life chances in Sweden are to a significant extent determined by corporeal appearance and place of origin (or the place of origin of one's parents). The job market is particularly closed to “Swedes of color” and recent immigrants or refugees from (e.g.) Africa and the Middle East, even when such individuals are highly educated with impressive credentials (Alatalo & Ostapenko, 2014; Blomqvist, 2015, p. 28; Goksör, 2015, p. 9). Many Swedes of color speak of the difficulty of living in a country where one is constantly reminded (due to one's “deviant” skin color) that one does not *really* belong here (Kalonaityté, Kawesa, & Tedros, 2007; Sawyer, 2002; Yngvesson, 2015), at least not on the same level as white Swedes. Research on the materialistic outcomes of racism is somewhat hampered by the fact that the Swedish government does not collect ethnic or racial data in its surveys (as in, e.g., the U.S.), but satisfies itself with geographical information (i.e., country of origin). This data can still be useful to the extent that geography can be associated with ethnic/racial classifications, but it is not perfect. In fact, based on my own discussion with anti-racist and post-colonial researchers in Sweden, it is clear that there is a fairly heated debate regarding the wisdom of advocating for the collection of ethnic/racial data. But existing studies (such as those cited above) clearly show the presence of discrimination in the job and housing markets, and also with regard to scores for secondary school students (Hinnerich, Höglin, & Johannesson, 2011).

Add to this the violent attacks on refugees, immigrants of color, Muslims, and Swedes of color that have been occurring lately in Sweden. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that “Sweden is burning”, given the large number of fires that have been set at already occupied or soon-to-be occupied refugee housing (Majlard, 2016a, p. 16). Swedish children and teachers of color have been targeted for murder by a white Swedish terrorist (Bilefsky, 2015), and the country has an active Nazi movement that regularly attacks Swedes of color and anti-racist marchers (Majlard, 2016b, p. 15). “Afro-Swedes” are especially vulnerable, having experienced a 24

percent increase in hate crimes since 2008 according to one report (Kushkush, 2016).

And with regard to the issue of gender, in spite of the country's international reputation as an advocate for women's rights, Sweden falls short on many quantitative measures of gender equality. Amanda Lundeteg, the director of a non-profit that works on improving gender equality in private industry, notes that in Serbia about 17% of corporate CEOs are women. In Sweden the figure is 6% (Johansson, 2016, p. 24). She also notes that there are still significant wage gaps between men and women in Sweden. And the overwhelming response of Swedish women to the #metoo campaign has revealed that many, many Swedish men do not really take the issue of gender equality very seriously at all (see Nordberg, 2017).

As in the U.S., spatial projection plays a role in assisting the reproduction of ignorance and denial of social problems such as racism and sexism. Madeleine Eriksson (2008; 2010) has written about internal orientalism in Sweden, which represents the north of the country alternatively as either an empty wilderness that has resources that the metropolitan south needs to exploit, or as a place where white, male Swedes are the opposite of sophisticated urban Swedes in the South – they are sexist, racist against their Sami neighbors, backwards, violent, lazy, etc. We can also identify a kind of spatial projection that portrays the most southern part of Sweden as “where the racists are”, as Allan Pred (2000) pointed out in his book *Even in Sweden*. This projection leads white Swedes to the convenient belief that “only the physical violence and fascist symbolics of skinheads and right-wing extremist groups have racist consequences” (Pred, 2004: 188). These varieties of internal orientalism help reproduce the Swedish exceptionalist ideology that hides the long history of *national* racism and racialized thinking in Sweden, from Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) in the 18th century to the State Institute for Racial Biology at Uppsala university in the 20th century, to today's *still* racialized imagined community of the nation.

At the same time, it is important to point out that there is an exclusionary dynamic in Sweden that is not *exclusively* about race, ethnicity, or gender. For example, it is not only Swedes of color who face higher unemployment rates; even white Swedes who received advanced degrees at prestigious universities outside of Sweden are often at a disadvantage in the job market (Blomqvist, 2015, p. 28). Corporeal appearance is not the only important factor in defining in-groups and out-groups in Sweden, even if it is a central one. I find it justified to call Sweden an “insider society”, where “outsiderness” is determined by a range of factors. There are various mechanisms by which the insiders ensure that only “people like them” are admitted to the in-group. The problem is particularly evident in Swedish academia, which is characterized by a system of formal hiring procedures that would seemingly discourage “inbreeding” in the constitution of the tenured faculty in Swedish academic departments, only to find that inbreeding is rather the norm than the exception (Alvesson & Rothstein, 2011; Kalantari, 2011). Indeed, certain universities have even repeatedly violated the law so as to ensure that they can hire internal candidates without open competition (Eliasson, 2017). It is difficult to reconcile the extent of the insider society in Sweden with the country's reputation for tolerance and openness, but I would argue that this exclusionary dynamic can be connected back to the *folkhem*, to the extent that one of the primary goals of the *folkhem* was to provide different kinds of *trygghet* for the population. *Trygghet* can be translated as “security”, but the nuances of this term are difficult to capture in translation. It relates to economic security, bodily security, and not least, *psychological* security. Psychological security is understood as being “guaranteed” in part by homogeneity, and thus there is an intense fear of *difference* in Swedish society (which is not helped by the fact that the *folkhem* can actually never *really* deliver on its promise of *trygghet*). And while difference is not *only* measured

<sup>2</sup> I do not want to overemphasize the distinction between “discursive” and “materialist” as there is not necessarily a clear line between these two perspectives in actual research.

through racial/ethnic and gender elements (i.e., as inhering in the body), these are certainly the most important exclusionary factors in contemporary Sweden.

This ignorance, denial and projection have direct consequences for the material and psychological well-being of internal Others in Sweden. External Others are also at risk. The ideology of Swedish exceptionalism is based in part on the assumption that Sweden works for international peace and human rights. But a key contradiction to this belief is presented by the Swedish weapons industry. Sweden is the third-ranked country in the world, behind Israel and Russia, in terms of arms exports per capita, and ranks around 11th to 13th in terms of the total value of exports (Jackson, 2014). About 30,000 people are employed in the Swedish weapons industry (Sullivan, 2014). The arms industry overall is very corrupt, and Sweden has had serious problems with corruption in its own arms sales (Braw, 2015). Sweden previously had a successful land mine industry, and mines made in Sweden (or manufactured elsewhere using Swedish explosives) have been responsible for killing an unknown number of people around the world (Physicians for Human Rights, 1993). No less than Desmond Tutu (2017, p. 8) has criticized Sweden for not addressing the contradictions of a public stand for peace at the same time that the government assists Swedish corporations with the goal of selling weapons systems abroad – often through questionable methods. As indicated earlier in Katrine Marçal's comments, the realities of the global political economy provide incentives for economic gain that are difficult to resist, even for the vaunted Swedish *folkhem* with its feminist foreign policy.

To return to the question posed in the title of this essay, it surely matters little to the victims of U.S. or Swedish fighter jets, bombs, or land mines that the manufacturer of their particular vector of death is globally hailed by some as a great economic/cultural/military superpower or a moral superpower. Just as it matters little to those in the U.S. and Sweden who face discrimination and premature death that they *theoretically* have access to the “American dream” or the Swedish *folkhem*. To be “crushed” is a fate that is hardly ameliorated by the national or international reputation of one's state as a superior model for the world to follow.

### Concluding comments

I have argued here that exceptionalism needs to be understood as an outgrowth of the ideology of nationalism, that the idea itself is an ideology that acts to obscure the ways in which the states in question harm people inside and outside their borders. A combination of psychological and political economy approaches illuminates the roles of various actors within the nationalist ideology of exceptionalism, from the general public to the political and corporate leadership.

I should emphasize that the shortcomings I have criticized in the U.S. and Sweden are by no means unique to these countries. As a citizen of both these states, and a scholar, I feel a particular responsibility to both raise political awareness of these problems and offer theorizations of these phenomena that facilitate their analysis. I certainly do not mean to shrug off the very real achievements of both countries, but we still need to be able to critically assess even those achievements that are held most dearly. For example, I would argue that the great success of the Swedish welfare state in raising living standards has resulted in the attainment of a “hyper-legitimacy” for the Swedish state. Thus in Sweden, the problem is not a lack of legitimacy of the state but rather an excess of legitimacy. There are certainly exceptions to this, but the hyper-legitimacy of the state feeds directly into Swedish exceptionalism and makes it harder to deal with various problems that directly impinge upon democracy, human rights, and welfare in the country. The idea is that because Sweden has great rules on paper, we

can conclude that problems like corruption are minimal at best, when in fact they are much deeper than the country's leaders want to admit. In contrast, in the U.S. there is absolutely no foreseeable risk that the state will become hyperlegitimate, rather the problem is more the reverse, such that some things would improve if state intervention in certain areas *within the country* would be seen as more legitimate than it currently is.

It is indeed difficult to strike the right balance in a political system. It may in fact be impossible. This is especially true because we have no strictly political systems, but instead a global political-economic system. It is also true because the entities that inhabit the world political-economic system are human beings, which means that our psychological processes are also key factors in reproducing our local and global injustices.

This is why I do not believe in “the revolution”. And yet, the survival of our species is entirely dependent on the realization of multiple revolutions (cf. Tazzioli, 2017). My message is this: “The revolution” is impossible, and we will die without revolutions. This is our human paradox.

### Declarations of interest

None.

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